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ABSTRACT

Four methods of measuring students' comprehension of French literature are discussed. The first method involves traditional comparison of themes or characters. Themes may concern war, women, or love, for example. Characters may be compared from the same or a different era or genre. The second approach uses the association of the material being studied with quotations from other sources, either by the same author or a different one. A comparison of quotations of French and non-French authors helps to demonstrate the universality of the French material and demonstrates the possibility of integrating two academic disciplines. A third method evolves from the extension of the coupling of two text types, and results in the organization of and active participation by the student in the concepts to be learned. Students must seek out an excerpt from a text and apply it in a different context. The fourth method involves self-projection by the student into another personality and/or time period. Specific examples of texts used with these approaches are presented for illustration. (MSE)

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CREATIVE TESTING IN FRENCH LITERATURE COURSES

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Creative Testing in French Literature Courses

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The process of forming a test is not generally considered one of the most rewarding moments of a French teacher's week. With a little imagination and determination, however, this sometimes disagreeable task can become an outlet for the teacher's creativity and can elicit thoughtful and original responses from the student. In the hope of realizing these goals, let us consider several methods of measuring students' comprehension of French literature. These will include 1) the traditional comparison of themes or characters, 2) the association of the material being studied with quotations from other sources, 3) the organization of and active participation by the student in the concepts to be learned, and 4) the self-projection by the student into another personality and/or time period. The examples and partial quotations given for these categories are ideas meant to suggest but not to limit options for evaluation.

The comparison of themes or characters has long been used effectively as a testing method. In a given series of works, the teacher might request a contrast and comparison of the attitudes expressed—those concerning war, for example, or women, or love. Characters of the same genre and era can be compared, like Eugène de Rastignac and Julien Sorel, and also those from differing genres (Vautrin and Hernani) or centuries (Sorel and Meursault) or both (la Princess de Clèves and Pauline [Polyeucte]). Moreover, additional aspects of the work under scrutiny can be considered ("Some of these days" from *La Nausée* and "la petite phrase" from *Un Amour de Swann*).

A second alternative for evaluating the students' understanding of the text is the practice of applying to the material under study quotations from other sources. One can choose a passage from another work by the same author being treated (excerpts from *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* with *L'Etranger*), as well as from a different French author (a passage from *Le Paysan de Paris* by Aragon, who at age 26 laments "le sentiment du merveilleux quotidien . . . qui se perd dans chaque homme" with *Le Petit Prince*). One

can also employ the very effective practice of asking that a critic's opinion be evaluated ("Plus on admire Stendhal et plus on est intelligent" [André Saurès]). I find it especially interesting to present to the students the conflicting opinions of critics and to request their opinions concerning these comments (Martin Turnell's opinion in *The Novel in France*, of *Le Père Goriot*: "far from being a masterpiece, it is as a whole one of the worst of Balzac's mature works" versus that of André Maurois in *From Proust to Camus*: "The genuine masterpiece is well constructed... It is well rounded and complete . . . *Le Père Goriot* exhibits these characteristics."

My personal preference in the category of the applications of quotations to the text is the use of material written by non-French authors. This technique not only emphasizes the universality of the French material but also demonstrates the possibility of integrating two academic disciplines. The following pairs of sources are representative of those which have been useful to me:

1. The works of Anouilh and "Be Yourself" by e. e. Cummings.
2. The works of Sartre and an excerpt from the *Principles of Psychology* by William James which begins "man alone, of all the creatures of the earth, can change his pattern."
3. Much of contemporary French literature and a passage from *The Revolt of the Masses* by José Ortega y Gasset including, "For life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost. The individual suspects this but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy."
4. Céleste's description of Meursault as "un homme . . . tout le monde savait ce que cela voulait dire" and Emerson's "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" from *Self Reliance*.
5. *L'Alouette* and a passage from Harvey Cox's *On Not Leaving It to the Snake*, including "Man is summoned to make his own decisions. So to shove them off on someone else, even on God or the Church, is a betrayal of his manhood."
6. *L'Etranger* and the statement in Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park* "But you can't do Camus's *The Stranger* for a Soviety audience. A man takes the life of a total stranger for no reason but ennui? It's purely western excess."
7. Any treatment of romanticism versus classicism and Robert Pirsig's fine definition of each in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

A third method of evaluation evolves out of the extension of this idea of coupling two types of texts. I have been able to involve the student

actively in the judging of the literature under study. For example, on one test in a class of survey of medieval and Renaissance works, I listed for the students the Ten Commandments and reminded them that many consider the Middle Ages the most religious of all epochs and the Renaissance among the least orthodox of times. I then requested that the students evaluate the two periods from a moral point of view by attempting to apply the Ten Commandments to the works we had read. In this way, the students had to organize the material and judge it in a new and perhaps memorable way. Another time during the seventeenth-century portion of this course, I requested that each student present to our class, as if it were that year's graduating class of the Sorbonne, a commencement address using as a text a passage from one of the authors studied. Such a procedure required the students not only to review the material, but to evaluate it from a personal standpoint. In this same survey course, which covers a vast amount of literature in one term (from *La Chanson de Roland* throught the eighteenth century), my final exam tries also to encourage the students to review the course by re-organizing the material, for I require them to summarize the course in their own way. The only restriction is that they complete the written exam within three hours, but they may spend all the time they can on the project in advance. They may bring to the exam only a list of authors' last names and they may relate the material chronogically, by genres, or in any other manner they choose. By this method, I hope to assure the review of the information while removing the fear of which small facts and quotations must be memorized from so vast an array of material.

An additional method by which the students actively participate in the concepts to be learned is one which requires the exercising of their creativity as well as their understanding of the material. For example, after our reading of "Correspondances" by Baudelaire, I ask for an original illustration rather than a definition of synesthesia. During a study of Verlaine's poetry, art books on impressionism and recordings of Debussy's music are made available. The students are then asked to write a personal response to these works and to focus on a comparison of them. In a study of realism and symbolism, the students are given several words (snow, a willow tree, velvet, etc.) and are asked to describe one of them both realistically and symbolically. These ideas demonstrate one of the most effective methods of testing that I have found because they help assure the internalization of the concepts and preclude mere memorization of them. At worst, this method produces appreciation of the labor required to produce masterpieces and at best it stimulates the student's own creative ability.

As a final example of testing, I mention one which encourages the student's self-projection into another personality and/or time period. After we read *L'Etranger*, for example, I have asked that the students assume the

role of Meursault's lawyer, but with a personality and ability of their own choosing. While studying this same text, I have remarked that people sometimes assign to Meursault childlike qualities, and I have then asked the students to imagine themselves as a parent of a young Meursault and to describe the advice and discipline they would offer the child. When presenting the concepts of *en soi* and *pour soi*, I have asked the students to imagine that they have amnesia and are allowed to pose only two or three questions about their former life. By this exercise the students are often able to see immediately their values ("Do I have a family?" or "Have I a religious affiliation?" or "Am I rich?" etc.) After reading *Un Amour de Swann* and *L'Immoraliste*, I once asked the female students to choose between a date with Swann and one with Michel and to state the reasons for their choice. This is, of course, merely a comparison of the two characters but one by means of which the students must involve herself more actively. The same effect can be achieved by asking a student to put his own personality and values into the situation of Eugène de Rastignac, for example, and to foresee his actions and reactions.

Equally interesting from the standpoint of encouraging the students to articulate their values is the practice of assigning to the students the role of God on Judgment Day. Whoever the accused—be it Emma Bovary, Rimbaud, Rieux, etc.—the students will not only delve into the character of that person but into their own standards as well. It is this method of evaluation that I believe to be ultimately most effective for it not only tests the students' knowledge of the material but stimulates them to know themselves and perhaps even to work toward self-improvement.

A method I have enjoyed using in conversation classes, that of having the students assume the personality of a French person of their choice (Rousseau, Dreyfus, Charlotte Corday, etc.), also proved interesting when applied to a final exam for a very special group of students studying the literature of nineteenth century. Since these students were unusually similar in ability as well as in the amount of work that went into their French study, I felt free to experiment by giving a group final exam. I asked each of them to choose an author from the nineteenth century and to write as a group and perform a play in which the chosen authors were characters. The television program "Meeting of the Minds" was the model for this activity. They chose their own theme (a discussion of a "new" poet named Guillaume Apollinaire) and fashioned a play in which each one not only judged the upstart according to his own literary standards, but in addition, each had researched and was able to portray (in costume) the fascinating personality of the writer being represented. This particular exercise had the added advantage of encouraging a comparison of nineteenth and twentieth-century life or standards.

One of our principal goals as teachers, of course, is to encourage the students to want to learn our subject, and then to love it as we do. This cannot be accomplished, I believe, by our probing only for what they do not know, but by our seeking methods of evaluation—just as we seek effective methods of presenting the material—which stimulate their desire and ability to learn more about French literature and about themselves. They will enhance their lives and ours as well.